Hinduism is not a religion but a way of life.

The beauty of Hinduism lies in its all embracing inclusiveness. Hinduism tells every one to worship God according to his own faith or *dharma*, and so it lives at peace with all the religions. Its freedom from dogma makes a forcible appeal to me inasmuch as it gives the votary the largest scope for self-expression.

Non-violence is common to all religions, but it has found the highest expression and application in Hinduism.

Hinduism is a growth of ages.

Hinduism abhors stagnation.

This book, a collection of extracts from Gandhiji's writings expounds the essence of Hinduism.

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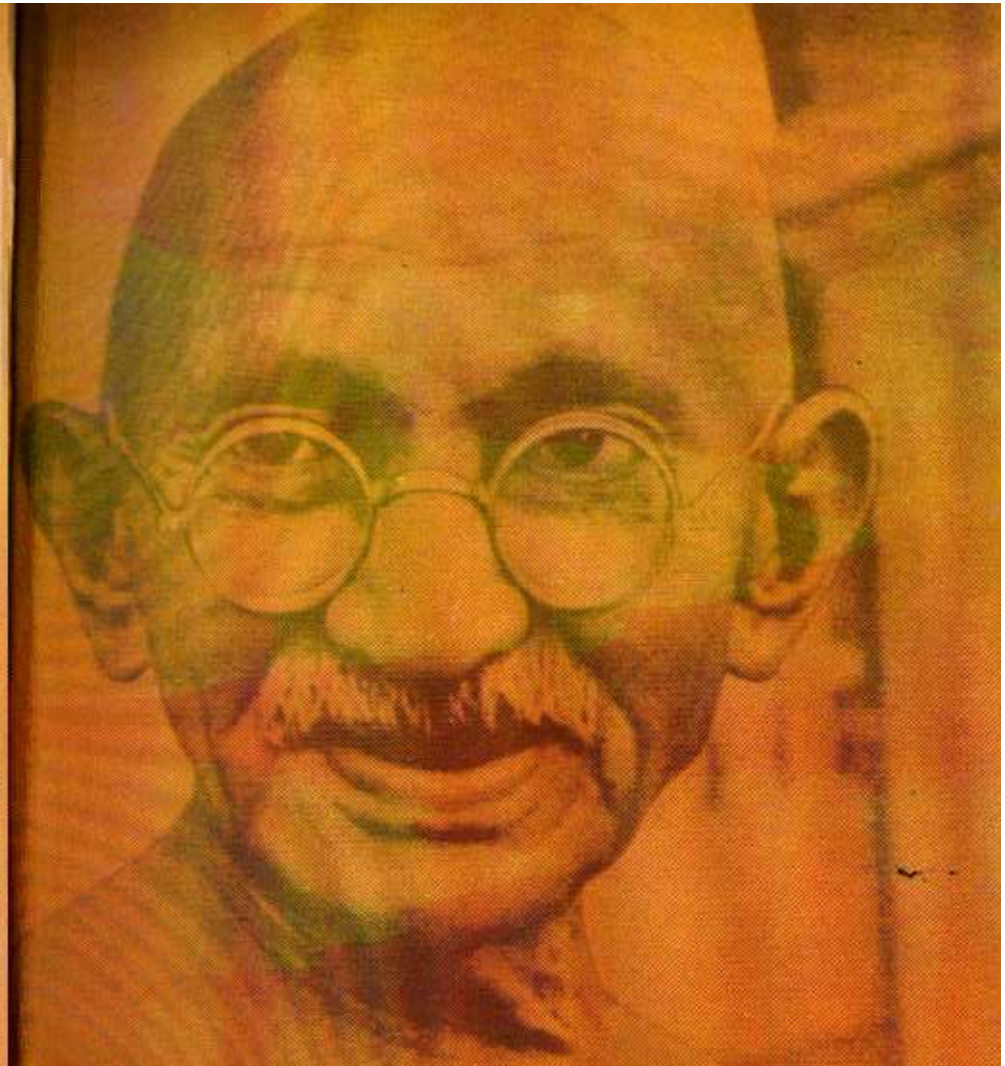

WHAT IS HINDUISM ?

MAHATMA GANDHI

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

What is Hinduism?

MAHATMA GANDHI

On behalf of
Indian Council of Historical Research

National Book Trust, India

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Preface

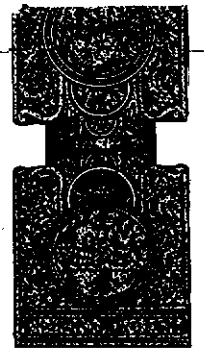
On the occasion of the 125th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, it gives me great pleasure to place before the wider community his rich understanding of Hindu Dharma. The articles included in this selection have been drawn mainly from Gandhiji's contributions to *Young India*, the *Harijan* and the *Navajivan*, in both Hindi and Gujarati. But even though these contributions were written on different occasions, they present a picture of Hindu Dharma which is difficult to surpass in its richness, its comprehensiveness and its sensitivity to the existential dilemmas of human existence.

The Mahatma's reflections on 'What is Hindu Dharma' would be invaluable at any point of time. However, I believe that they are particularly relevant at the present juncture.

In bringing out this selection, I have been greatly assisted by my colleague in the Nehru Museum and its Deputy Director, Dr Hari Dev Sharma. I am also deeply beholden to the National Book Trust for undertaking the publication of this book, on behalf of the Indian Council of Historical Research, in a very short span of time.

RAVINDER KUMAR
Chairman
Indian Council of Historical Research
New Delhi

26 April 1994



1

What is Hinduism?

It is the good fortune or the misfortune of Hinduism that it has no official creed. In order therefore to protect myself against any misunderstanding I have said Truth and Non-violence is my creed. If I were asked to define the Hindu creed I should simply say: search after Truth through non-violent means. A man may not believe even in God and still he may call himself a Hindu. Hinduism is a relentless pursuit after truth and if today it has become moribund, inactive, irresponsive to growth, it is because we are fatigued; and as soon as the fatigue is over, Hinduism will burst forth upon the world with a brilliance perhaps unknown before. Of course, therefore, Hinduism is the most tolerant of all religions. Its creed is all-embracing.

Young India, 24 April 1924

2

Is there Satan in Hinduism?

In my opinion the beauty of Hinduism lies in its all-embracing inclusiveness. What the divine author of the *Mahabharata* said of his great creation is equally true of Hinduism. What of substance is contained in any other religion is always to be found in Hinduism. And what is not contained in it is insubstantial or unnecessary.

Young India, 17 September 1925

3

Why I am a Hindu?

An American friend who subscribes herself as a lifelong friend of India writes:

> As Hinduism is one of the prominent religions of the East, and as you have made a study of Christianity and Hinduism, and on the basis of that study have announced that you are a Hindu, I beg leave to ask of you if you will do me the favour to give me your reasons for that choice. Hindus and Christians alike realize that man's chief need is to know God and to worship Him in spirit and in truth. Believing that Christ was a revelation of God, Christians of America have sent to India thousands of their sons and daughters to tell the people of India about Christ. Will you in return kindly give us your interpretation of Hinduism and make a comparison of Hinduism with the teachings of Christ? I will be deeply grateful for this favour.

I have ventured at several missionary meetings to tell English and American missionaries that if they could have refrained from 'telling' India about Christ and had merely lived the life enjoined upon them by the

Sermon on the Mount, India instead of suspecting them would have appreciated their living in the midst of her children and directly profited by their presence. Holding this view, I can 'tell' American friends nothing about Hinduism by way of 'return'. I do not believe in people telling others of their faith, especially with a view to conversion. Faith does not admit of telling. It has to be lived and then it becomes self-propagating.

Nor do I consider myself fit to interpret Hinduism except through my own life. And if I may not interpret Hinduism through my written word, I may not compare it with Christianity. The only thing it is possible for me therefore to do is to say as briefly as I can, why I am a Hindu.

Believing as I do in the influence of heredity, being born in a Hindu family, I have remained a Hindu. I should reject it, if I found it inconsistent with my moral sense or my spiritual growth. On examination I have found it to be the most tolerant of all religions known to me. Its freedom from dogma makes a forcible appeal to me inasmuch as it gives the votary the largest scope for self-expression. Not being an exclusive religion, it enables the followers of that faith not merely to respect all the other religions, but it also enables them to admire and assimilate whatever may be good in the other faiths. Non-violence is common to all religions, but it has found the highest expression and application in Hinduism. (I do not regard Jainism or Buddhism as separate from Hinduism.) Hinduism believes in the oneness not of merely all human life but in the oneness of all that lives. Its worship of the cow is, in my opinion, its unique contribution to the evolution of humanitarianism. It is a practical application of the belief in the oneness and, therefore, sacredness, of all life. The great belief in transmigration is a direct consequence of that

belief. Finally the discovery of the law of *varnashrama* is a magnificent result of the ceaseless search for truth. I must not burden this article with definitions of the essentials sketched here, except to say that the present ideas of cow-worship and *varnashrama* are a caricature of what in my opinion the originals are. In this all too brief a sketch I have mentioned what occurs to me to be the outstanding features of Hinduism that keep me in its fold.

Young India, 20 October 1927

4

Hinduism

I have asserted my claim to being a *Sanatani* Hindu, and yet there are things which are commonly done in the name of Hinduism, which I disregard. I have no desire to be called a *Sanatani* Hindu or any other if I am not such. It is therefore necessary for me once for all distinctly to give my meaning of *Sanatana* Hinduism. The word *Sanatana* I use in its natural sense.

I call myself a *Sanatani* Hindu, because,

1. I believe in the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Puranas* and all that goes by the name of Hindu scriptures, and therefore in *avataras* and rebirth;
2. I believe in the *varnashrama dharma* in a sense, in my opinion, strictly *Vedic* but not in its present popular and crude sense;
3. I believe in the protection of the cow in its much larger sense than the popular;
4. I do not disbelieve in idol-worship.

The reader will note that I have purposely refrained from using the word divine origin in reference to the *Vedas* or any other scriptures. For I do not believe in the exclusive divinity of the *Vedas*. I believe the Bible,

the Quran, and the Zend Avesta to be as much divinely inspired as the *Vedas*. My belief in the Hindu scriptures does not require me to accept every word and every verse as divinely inspired. Nor do I claim to have any first-hand knowledge of these wonderful books. But I do claim to know and feel the truths of the essential teaching of the scriptures. I decline to be bound by any interpretation, however learned it may be, if it is repugnant to reason or moral sense. I do most emphatically repudiate the claim (if they advance any such) of the present *Shankaracharyas* and *shastris* to give a correct interpretation of the Hindu scriptures. On the contrary I believe that our present knowledge of these books is in a most chaotic state. I believe implicitly in the Hindu aphorism, that no one truly knows the *shastras* who has not attained perfection in Innocence (*ahimsa*), Truth (*satya*) and Self-control (*brahmacharya*) and who has not renounced all acquisition or possession of wealth. I believe in the institution of *gurus*, but in this age millions must go without a *guru*, because it is a rare thing to find a combination of perfect purity and perfect learning. But one need not despair of ever knowing the truth of one's religion, because the fundamentals of Hinduism, as of every great religion, are unchangeable, and easily understood. Every Hindu believes in God and his oneness, in rebirth and salvation.

I can no more describe my feeling for Hinduism than for my own wife. She moves me as no other woman in the world can. Not that she has no faults. I dare say she has many more than I see myself. But the feeling of an indissoluble bond is there. Even so I feel for and about Hinduism with all its faults and limitations. Nothing elates me so much as the music of the *Gita* or the *Ramayana* by Tulsidas, the only two books in Hinduism I may be said to know. When I fancied I was taking

my last breath the *Gita* was my solace. I know the vice that is going on today in all the great Hindu shrines, but I love them in spite of their unspeakable failings. There is an interest which I take in them and which I take in no other. I am a reformer through and through. But my zeal never takes me to the rejection of any of the essential things of Hinduism. I have said I do not disbelieve in idol-worship. An idol does not excite any feeling of veneration in me. But I think that idol-worship is part of human nature. We hanker after symbolism. Why should one be more composed in a church than elsewhere? Images are an aid to worship. No Hindu considers an image to be God. I do not consider idol-worship a sin.

It is clear from the foregoing, that Hinduism is not an exclusive religion. In it there is room for the worship of all the prophets of the world. It is not a missionary religion in the ordinary sense of the term. It has no doubt absorbed many tribes in its fold, but this absorption has been of an evolutionary imperceptible character. Hinduism tells every one to worship God according to his own faith or *dharma*, and so it lives at peace with all the religions.

That being my conception of Hinduism, I have never been able to reconcile myself to untouchability. I have always regarded it as an excrescence. It is true that it has been handed down to us from generations, but so are many evil practices even to this day. I should be ashamed to think that dedication of girls to virtual prostitution was a part of Hinduism. Yet it is practised by Hindus in many parts of India. I consider it positive irreligion to sacrifice goats to Kali and do not consider it a part of Hinduism. Hinduism is a growth of ages. The very name, Hinduism, was given to the religion of the people of Hindustan by foreigners. There was no doubt

at one time sacrifice of animals offered in the name of religion. But it is not religion, much less is it Hindu religion. And so also it seems to me, that when cow-protection became an article of faith with our ancestors, those who persisted in eating beef were excommunicated. The civil strife must have been fierce. Social boycott was applied not only to the recalcitrants, but their sins were visited upon their children also. The practice which had probably its origin in good intentions hardened into usage, and even verses crept into our sacred books giving the practice a permanence wholly undeserved and still less justified. Whether my theory is correct or not, untouchability is repugnant to reason and to the instinct of mercy, pity or love. A religion that establishes the worship of the cow cannot possibly countenance or warrant a cruel and inhuman boycott of human beings. And I should be content to be torn to pieces rather than disown the suppressed classes. Hindus will certainly never deserve freedom, nor get it, if they allow their noble religion to be disgraced by the retention of the taint of untouchability. And as I love Hinduism dearer than the life itself, the taint has become for me an intolerable burden. Let us not deny God by denying to a fifth of our race the right of association on an equal footing.

Young India, 6 October 1921

5

Sanatana Hindu

[To a correspondent who criticised his interpretation of Hinduism Gandhiji wrote:]

I am not a literalist. Therefore I try to understand the *spirit* of the various scriptures of the world. I apply the test of Truth and *Ahimsa* laid down by these very scriptures for interpretation. I reject what is inconsistent with that test, and I appropriate all that is consistent with it. The story of a *shudra* having been punished by Ramachandra for daring to learn the *Vedas* I reject as an interpolation. And in any event, I worship Rama, the perfect being of my conception, not a historical person facts about whose life may vary with the progress of new historical discoveries and researches. Tulsidas had nothing to do with the Rama of history. Judged by historical test, his *Ramayana* would be fit for the scrap heap. As a spiritual experience, his book is almost unrivalled at least for me. And then, too, I do not swear by every word that is to be found in so many editions published as the *Ramayana* of Tulsidas. It is the spirit running through the book that holds me spellbound. I cannot myself subscribe to the prohibition against *shudras*

learning the *Vedas*. Indeed, in my opinion, at the present moment, we are all predominantly *shudras*, so long as we are serfs. Knowledge cannot be the prerogative of any class or section. But I can conceive the impossibility of people assimilating higher or subtler truths unless they have undergone preliminary training, even as those who have not made preliminary preparations are quite unfit to breathe the rarefied atmosphere in high altitudes, or those who have no preliminary training in simple mathematics are unfit to understand or assimilate higher geometry or algebra. Lastly, I believe in certain healthy conventions. There is a convention surrounding the recitation of the *Gayatri*. The convention is that it should be recited only at stated times and after ablutions performed in the prescribed manner. As I believe in those conventions, and as I am not able always to conform to them, for years past I have followed the later Saints, and therefore have satisfied myself with the *Dwadashakshara Mantra* of the *Bhagawata* or the still simpler formula of Tulsidas and a few selections from the *Gita* and other works, and a few *bhajanas* in *Prakrit*. These are my daily spiritual food—my *Gayatri*. They give me all the peace and solace I need from day to day.

Young India, 27 August 1925

6

Some Objections Answered

I want to see the spinning wheel everywhere, because I see pauperism everywhere. Not until and unless we have fed and clothed the skeletons of India, will religion have any meaning for them. They are living the cattle-life today, and we are responsible for it. The spinning wheel is therefore a penance for us. Religion is service of the helpless. God manifests Himself to us in the form of the helpless and the stricken. But we in spite of our forehead marks take no notice of them i.e. of God. God is and is not in the *Vedas*. He who reads the spirit of the *Vedas* sees God therein. He who clings to the letter of the *Vedas* is a *vedia*—a literalist. Narasinha Mehta does indeed sing the praise of the rosary, and the praise is well-merited where it is given. But the same Narasinha has sung:

> Of what avail is the *tilaka* and the *tulsi*, of what avail is the rosary and the muttering of the Name, what avail is the grammatical interpretation of the *Veda*, what avail is the mastery of the letters? All these are devices to fill the belly and nothing worth without their helping to a realization of the

Parabrahma.

The Mussulman does count the beads of his *tasbih*, and the Christian of the rosary. But both would think themselves fallen from religion if their *tasbih* and rosary prevented them from running to the succour of one who, for instance, was lying stricken with a snake-bite. Mere knowledge of the *Vedas* cannot make our *brahmanas* spiritual preceptors. If it did, Max Muller would have become one. The *brahmana* who has understood the religion of today will certainly give *Vedic* learning a secondary place and propagate the religion of the spinning wheel, relieve the hunger of the millions of his starving countrymen and only then, and not until then, lose himself in *Vedic* studies.

I have certainly regarded spinning superior to the practice of denominational religions. But that does not mean that the latter should be given up. I only mean that a *dharma* which has to be observed by the followers of all religions transcends them, and hence I say that a *brahmana* is a better *brahmana*, a Mussulman a better Mussulman, a *Vaishnava* a better *Vaishnava*, if he turns the wheel in the spirit of service.

If it was possible for me to turn the wheel in my bed, and if I felt that it would help me in concentrating my mind on God, I would certainly leave the rosary aside and turn the wheel. If I am strong enough to turn the wheel, and I have to make a choice between counting beads or turning the wheel, I would certainly decide in favour of the wheel, making it my rosary, so long as I found poverty and starvation stalking the land. I do look forward to a time when even repeating the name of Rama will become a hindrance. When I have realized that Rama transcends even speech, I shall have no need to repeat the name. The spinning wheel, the rosary and the *Ramanama* are all the same to me. They

subserve the same end, they teach me the religion of service. I cannot practise *ahimsa* without practising the religion of service, and I cannot find the truth without practising the religion of *ahimsa*. And there is no religion other than truth. Truth is Rama, Narayana, *Ishwara*, *Khuda*, Allah, God. [As Narasinha says, 'The different shapes into which gold is beaten gives rise to different names and forms; but ultimately it is all gold.']

Young India, 14 August 1924

7

The Congress and After

In the name of religion we Hindus have made a fetish of outward observances, and have degraded religion by making it simply a question of eating and drinking. Brahmanism owes its unrivalled position to its self-abnegation, its inward purity, its severe austerity—all these illumined by knowledge. Hindus are doomed if they attach undue importance to the spiritual effects of foods and human contacts. Placed as we are in the midst of trials and temptations from within, and touched and polluted as we are by all the most untouchable and the vilest thought currents, let us not, in our arrogance, exaggerate the influence of contact with people whom we often ignorantly and more often arrogantly consider to be our inferiors. Before the Throne of the Almighty we shall be judged, not by what we have eaten nor by whom we have been touched by but by whom we have served and how. Inasmuch as we serve a single human being in distress, we shall find favour in the sight of God. Bad and stimulating or dirty foods we must avoid as we must avoid bad contact. But let us not give these observances a place out of all proportion to their

importance. We dare not use abstinence from certain foods as a cover for fraud, hypocrisy, and worse vices. We dare not refuse to serve a fallen or a dirty brother lest his contact should injure our spiritual growth.

Young India, 5 January 1992

8

My Mission

I do not consider myself worthy to be mentioned in the same breath with the race of prophets. I am a humble seeker after truth. I am impatient to realize myself, to attain *moksha* in this very existence. My national service is part of my training for freeing my soul from the bondage of flesh. Thus considered, my service may be regarded as purely selfish. I have no desire for the perishable kingdom of earth. I am striving for the Kingdom of Heaven which is *moksha*. To attain my end it is not necessary for me to seek the shelter of a cave. I carry one about me, if I would but know it. A cave-dweller can build castles in the air whereas a dweller in a palace like Janak has no castles to build. The cave-dweller who hovers round the world on the wings of thought has no peace. A Janak though living in the midst of 'pomp and circumstance' may have peace that passeth understanding. For me the road to salvation lies through incessant toil in the service of my country and therethrough of humanity. I want to identify myself with everthing that lives. In the language of the *Gita* I want to live at peace with both friend and foe. Though

therefore a Mussulman or a Christian or a Hindu may despise me and hate me. I want to love him and serve him even as I would love my wife or son though they hate me. So my patriotism is for me a stage in my journey to the land of eternal freedom and peace. Thus it will be seen that for me there are no politics devoid of religion. They subserve religion. Politics bereft of religion are a death-trap because they kill the soul.

Young India, 3 April 1924

9

Hindu-Muslim Tension
Its Causes and Cure

In my opinion there is no such thing as proselytism in Hinduism as it is understood in Christianity or to a lesser extent in Islam. The Arya Samaj has, I think, copied the Christians in planning its propaganda. The modern method does not appeal to me. It has done more harm than good. Though regarded as a matter of the heart purely and one between the Maker and oneself, it has degenerated into an appeal to the selfish instinct. The Arya Samaj preacher is never so happy as when he is reviling other religions. My Hindu instinct tells me that all religions are more or less true. All proceed from the same God, but all are imperfect human instrumentality. The real *shuddhi* movement should consist in each one trying to arrive at perfection in his or her own faith. In such a plan character would be the only test. What is the use of crossing from one compartment to another, if it does not mean a moral rise? What is the meaning of my trying to convert to the service of God (for that must be the implication of *shuddhi* or *tabligh*) when those who are in my fold are every day denying

God by their actions? 'Physician, heal thyself' is more true in matters religious than mundane. But these are my views. If the Arya Samajists think that they have a call from their conscience, they have a perfect right to conduct the movement. Such a burning call recognizes no time limit, no checks of experience. If Hindu-Muslim unity is endangered because an Arya Samaj preacher or a Mussulman preacher preaches his faith in obedience to a call from within, that unity is only skin-deep. Why should we be ruffled by such movements? Only they must be genuine. If the Malkanas wanted to return to the Hindu fold, they had a perfect right to do so whenever they liked. But no propaganda can be allowed which reviles other religions. For that would be negation of toleration. The best way of dealing with such propaganda is to publicly condemn it.

Young India, 29 May 1924

10

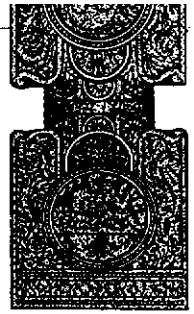
What may Hindus do?

Though the majority of the Mussulmans of India and the Hindus belong to the same 'stock', the religious environment has made them different. I believe and I have noticed too that thought transforms man's features as well as character. The Sikhs are the most recent illustration of the fact. The Mussulman being generally in a minority has as a class developed into a bully. Moreover, being heir to fresh traditions he exhibits the virility of a comparatively new system of life. Though in my opinion non-violence has a predominant place in the Quran, the thirteen hundred years of imperialistic expansion has made the Mussulmans fighters as a body. They are therefore aggressive. Bullying is the natural excrescence of an aggressive spirit. The Hindu has an ages-old civilization. He is essentially non-violent. His civilization has passed through the experiences that the two recent ones are still passing through. If Hinduism was ever imperialistic in the modern sense of the term, it has outlived its imperialism and has either deliberately or as a matter of course given it up. Predominance of the non-violent spirit has restricted the

use of arms to a small minority which must always be subordinate to a civil power highly spiritual, learned and selfless. The Hindus as a body are therefore not equipped for fighting. But not having retained their spiritual training, they have forgotten the use of an effective substitute for arms, and not knowing their use nor having an aptitude for them, they have become docile to the point of timidity or cowardice. This vice is therefore a natural excrescence of gentleness. Holding this view, I do not think that the Hindu exclusiveness, bad as it undoubtedly is, has much to do with the Hindu timidity. Hence also my disbelief in *akhadas* as a means of self-defence. I prize them for physical culture but, for self-defence, I would restore the spiritual culture. The best and most lasting self-defence is self-purification. I refuse to be lifted off my feet because of the scares that haunt us today. If Hindus would but believe in themselves and work in accordance with their traditions, they will have no reason to fear bullying. The moment they recommence the real spiritual training the Mussulman will respond. He cannot help it. If I can get together a band of young Hindus with faith in themselves and therefore faith in the Mussulmans, the band will become a shield for the weaker ones. They (the young Hindus) will teach how to die without killing. I know no other way. When our ancestors saw affliction surrounding them, they went in for *tapasya*—purification. They realized the helplessness of the flesh and in their helplessness they prayed till they compelled the Maker to obey their call. 'O yes,' says my Hindu friend, 'but then God sent some one to weild arms.' I am not concerned with denying the truth of the retort. All I say to the friend is that as a Hindu he may not ignore the cause and secure the result. It will be time to fight when we have done enough *tapasya*. Are we purified enough?

I ask. Have we even done willing penance for the sin of untouchability, let alone the personal purity of individuals? Are our religious preceptors all that they should be? We are beating the air whilst we simply concentrate our attention upon picking holes in the Mussulman conduct.

Young India, 19 June 1924



11

Hinduism of Today

Hinduism is a living organism liable to growth and decay, and subject to the laws of Nature. One and indivisible at the root it has grown into a vast tree with innumerable branches. The changes in the seasons affect it. It has its autumn and summer, its winter and spring. The rains nourish and fructify it too. It is and is not based on scriptures. It does not derive its authority from one book. The *Gita* is universally accepted, but even then it only shows the way. It has hardly any effect on custom. Hinduism is like the Ganga pure and unsullied at its source, but taking in its course the impurities in the way. Even like the Ganga it is beneficent in its total effect. It takes a provincial form in every province, but the inner substance is retained everywhere. Custom is not religion. Custom may change, but religion will remain unaltered.

Purity of Hinduism depends on the self-restraint of its votaries. Whenever their religion has been in danger, the Hindus have undergone rigorous penance, searched the causes of the danger and devised means for combating them. The *shastras* are ever growing. The

Vedas, the *Upanishads*, the *Smritis*, the *Puranas*, and the *Itihasas* did not arise at one and the same time. Each grew out of the necessities of particular periods, and therefore they seem to conflict with one another. These books do not enunciate anew the eternal truths but show how these were practised at the time to which the books belong. A practice which was good enough in a particular period would, if blindly repeated in another, land people into the 'slough of despond'. Because the practice of animal-sacrifice obtained at one time, shall we revive it today? Because at one time we used to eat beef, shall we also do so now? Because at one time, we used to chop off the hands and feet of thieves, shall we revive that barbarity today? Shall we revive polyandry? Shall we revive child-marriage? Because we discarded a section of humanity one day, shall we brand their descendants today as outcastes?

Hinduism abhors stagnation. Knowledge is limitless and so also the application of truth. Everyday we add to our knowledge of the power of *Atman*, and we shall keep on doing so. New experience will teach us new duties, but truth shall ever be the same. Who has ever known it in its entirety? The *Vedas* represent the truth, they are infinite. But who has known them in their entirety? What goes today by the name of the *Vedas* are not even a millionth part of the real *Veda*—the Book of Knowledge. And who knows the entire meaning of even the few books that we have? Rather than wade through these infinite complications, our sages taught us to learn one thing: 'As with the Self, so with the Universe'. It is not possible to scan the universe, as it is to scan the self. Know the self and you know the universe. But even knowledge of the self within presupposes ceaseless striving –not only ceaseless but pure, and pure striving presupposes a pure heart, which in its

turn depends on the practice of *yamas** and *niyamas*—the *cardinal* and *casual* virtues.

This practice is not possible without God's grace which presupposes Faith and Devotion. This is why Tulsidas sang of the glory of *Ramanama*, that is why the author of the *Bhagawata* taught the *Dwadashakshara Mantra (Om Namo Bhagawate Vasudevaya)*. To my mind he is a *Sanatani* Hindu who can repeat this *mantra* from the heart. All else is a bottomless pit, as the sage Akho† has said.

Europeans study our manners and customs. But theirs is the study of a critic not the study of a devotee. Their 'study' cannot teach me religion.

Hinduism does not consist in eating and non-eating. Its kernel consists in right conduct, in correct observance of truth and non-violence. Many a man eating meat, but observing the cardinal virtues of compassion and truth, and living in the fear of God, is a better Hindu than a hypocrite who abstains from meat. And he whose eyes are opened to the truth of the violence in beef-eating or meat-eating and who has therefore rejected them, who loves 'both man and bird and beast' is worthy of our adoration. He has seen and known God; he is His best devotee. He is the teacher of mankind.

Hinduism and all their religions are being weighed in the balance. Eternal truth is one. God also is one. Let every one of us steer clear of conflicting creeds and customs and follow the straight path of truth. Only then shall we be true Hindus. Many styling themselves *sanatanis* stalk the earth. Who knows how few of them will be chosen by God? God's grace shall descend on those who do His will and wait upon Him, not on those who simply mutter 'Rama Rama'.

Young India, 8 April 1926

**Yamas*, the cardinal virtues, according to *Yogashastra*, are *Ahimsa* (non-violence), *Satya* (truth), *Asteya* (non-stealing), *Brahmacharya* (celibacy), *Aparigraha* (non-possession). The *Niyamas* or the casual virtues are, according to the same authority, *Shaucha* (bodily purity), *Santosha* (contentment), *Tapa* (forbearance), *Swadhyaya* (study of scriptures), *Ishwarapranidhana* (resignation to the will of God).

--M.D.

†A poet-seer of Gujarat.

12

The Hydra-headed Monster

The stories told in the *Puranas* are some of them most dangerous, if we do not know their bearing on the present conditions. The *shastras* would be death-traps if we were to regulate our conduct according to every detail given in them or according to that of the characters therein described. They help us only to define and argue out fundamental principles. If some well-known character in religious books sinned against God or man, is that a warrant for our repeating the sin? It is enough for us to be told, once for all, that Truth is the only thing that matters in the world, that Truth is God. It is irrelevant to be told that even Yudhishthira was betrayed into an untruth. It is more relevant for us to know that when he spoke an untruth, he had to suffer for it that very moment and that his great name in no way protected him from punishment. Similary, it is irrelevant for us to be told that Adishankara avoided a *chandala*. It is enough for us to know that a religion that teaches us to treat all that lives as we treat ourselves, cannot possibly countenance the inhuman treatment of a single creature, let alone a whole class of perfectly

innocent human beings. Moreover we have not even all the facts before us to judge what Adishankara did or did not do. Still less, do we know the meaning of the word *chandala* where it occurs. It has admittedly many meanings, one of which is a sinner. But if all sinners are to be regarded as untouchables, it is very much to be feared that we should all, not excluding the Pandit* himself, be under the ban of untouchability. That untouchability is an old institution, nobody has ever denied. But, if it is an evil, it cannot be defended on the ground of its antiquity.

Young India, 29 July 1926

*This article from which this excerpt is made was written in answer to a plea for untouchability made by a Pandit from the South.

13

Tulsidas

Several friends on various occasions have addressed to me criticisms regarding my attitude towards the *Tulsi-Ramayana*. The substance of their criticisms is as follows:

> You have described the *Ramayana* as the best of books, but we have never been able to reconcile ourselves with your view. Do not you see how *Tulsidas* has disparaged womankind, defended Rama's unchivalrous ambuscade on Vali, praised Vibhishan for betrayal of his country, and described Rama as an *avatara* in spite of his gross injustice to Sita? What beauty do you find in a book like this? Or do you think that the poetic beauty of the book compensates for everything else? If it is so then we venture to suggest that you have no qualifications for the task.

I admit that if we take the criticisms of every point individually they will be found difficult to refute and the whole of the *Ramayana* can, in this manner, be easily condemned. But that can be said of almost everything and everybody. There is a story related about a celebrated artist that in order to answer his critics he put his

picture in a show window and invited visitors to indicate their opinion by marking the spot they did not like. The result was that there was hardly any portion that was not covered by the critics' marks. As a matter of fact, however, the picture was a masterpiece of art. Indeed even the *Vedas*, the Bible and the Quran have not been exempt from condemnation. In order to arrive at a proper estimate of a book it must be judged as a whole. So much for external criticism. The internal test of a book consists in finding out what effect it has produced on the majority of its readers. Judged by either method the position of the *Ramayana* as a book *par excellence* remains unassailable. This, however, does not mean that it is absolutely faultless. But it is claimed on behalf of the *Ramayana* that it has given peace to millions, has given faith to those who had it not, and is even today serving as a healing balm to thousands who are burnt by the fire of unbelief. Every page of it is overflowing with devotion. It is a veritable mine of spiritual experience.

It is true that the *Ramayana* is sometimes used by evil-minded persons to support their evil practices. But that is no proof of evil in the *Ramayana*. I admit that Tulsidas has, unintentionally as I think, done injustice to womankind. In this, as in several other respects also, he has failed to rise above the prevailing notions of his age. In other words Tulsidas was not a reformer; he was only a prince among devotees. The faults of the *Ramayana* are less a reflection on Tulsidas than a reflection on the age in which he lived.

What should be the attitude of the reformer regarding the position of women or towards Tulsidas under such circumstances? Can he derive no help whatever from Tulsidas? The reply is emphatically 'he can'. In spite of disparaging remarks about women in the *Ramayana* it should not be forgotten that in it Tulsidas

has presented to the world his matchless picture of Sita. Where would Rama be without Sita? We find a host of other ennobling figures like Kausalya, Sumitra etc. in the *Ramayana*. We bow our head in reverence before the faith and devotion of Shabari and Ahalya. Ravana was a monster but Mandodari was a *sati*. In my opinion these instances go to prove that Tulsidas was no reviler of women by conviction. On the contrary, so far as his convictions went, he had only reverence for them. So much for Tulsidas's attitude towards women.

In the matter of the killing of Vali, however, there is room for two opinions. In Vibhishan I can find no fault. Vibhishan offered Satyagraha against his brother. His example teaches us that it is a travesty of patriotism to sympathize with or try to conceal the faults of one's rulers or country, and to oppose them is the truest patriotism. By helping Rama Vibhishan rendered the truest service to his country. The treatment of Sita by Rama does not denote heartlessness. It is a proof of a duel between kingly duty and a husband's love for wife.

To the sceptics who feel honest doubts in connection with the *Ramayana*, I would suggest that they should not accept anybody's interpretations mechanically. They should leave out such portions about which they feel doubtful. Nothing contrary to truth and *ahimsa* need be condoned. It would be sheer perversity to argue that because in our opinion Rama practised deception, we too may do likewise. The proper thing to do would be to believe that Rama was incapable of practising deception. As the Gita says, 'There is nothing in the world that is entirely free from fault.' Let us, therefore, like the fabled swan who rejects the water and takes only the milk, learn to treasure only the good and reject the evil in everything. Nothing and no one is perfect but God.

Young India, 31 October 1929

14

Weekly Letter
(Other Questions)

[Gandhiji's conversation with Mr. Basil Mathews who was curious to know if Gandhiji followed any spiritual practices and what special reading he had found helpful:]

Gandhiji: I am a stranger to *yogic* practices. The practice I follow is a practice I learnt in my childhood from my nurse. I was afraid of ghosts. She used to say to me: 'There are no ghosts, but if you are afraid, repeat *Ramanama*.' What I learnt in my childhood has become a huge thing in my mental firmament. It is a sun that has brightened my darkest hour. A Christian may find the same solace from the repetition of the name of Jesus and a Muslim from the name of Allah. All these things have the same implications and they produce identical results under identical circumstances. Only the repetition must not be a lip expression, but part of your very being.

About helpful readings, we have regular readings of the *Bhagawadgita* and we have now reached a stage when we finish the *Gita* every week by having readings of appointed chapters every morning. Then we have

hymns from the various saints of India, and we therein include hymns from the Christian hymn-book. As Khansaheb is with us, we have readings from the Quran also. We believe in the equality of all religions. I derive the greatest consolation from my reading of Tulsidas's *Ramayana*. I have also derived solace from the New Testament and the Quran. I don't approach them with a critical mind. They are to me as important as the *Bhagawadgita*, though everything in the former may not appeal to me—everything in the Epistles of Paul for instance—nor everything in Tulsidas. The *Gita* is a pure religious discourse given without any embellishment. It simply describes the progress of the pilgrim soul towards the Supreme Goal. Therefore there is no question of selection.

Mr. Mathews: You are really a Protestant.

Gandhiji: I do not know what I am or am not, Mr. Hodge will call me a Presbyterian!

Mr. Mathews: Where do you find the seat of authority?

Gandhiji: It lies here (pointing to his breast). I exercise my judgement about every scripture, including the *Gita*. I cannot let a scriptural text supersede my reason. Whilst I believe that the principal books are inspired, they suffer from a process of double distillation. Firstly, they come through a human prophet, and then through the commentaries of interpreters. Nothing in them comes from God directly. Mathew may give one version of one text, and John may give another. I cannot surrender my reason whilst I subscribe to divine revelation. And above all, 'the letter killeth, the spirit giveth life.' But you must not misunderstand my position. I believe in Faith also, in things where Reason has no place, e.g. the existence of God. No argument can move me from that faith, and like that little girl who

repeated against all reason 'yet we are seven', I would like to repeat, on being baffled in argument by a very superior intellect, 'Yet there is God'.

Harijan, 5 December 1936

15

Weekly Letter
(A talk with Rao Bhadur Rajah)

In the purest type of Hinduism a *brahmana*, an ant, an elephant and a dog-eater (*shwapacha*) are of the same status. And because our philosophy is so high, and we have failed to live up to it, that very philosophy today stinks in our nostrils. Hinduism insists on the brotherhood not only of all mankind but of all that lives. It is a conception which makes one giddy, but we have to work up to it. The moment we have restored real living equality between man and man, we shall be able to establish equality between man and the whole creation. When that day comes we shall have peace on earth and goodwill to men.

Harijan, 28 March 1936

16

Weekly Letter
(The Golden Key)

For the first time at the public meeting in Quilon, Gandhiji summed up the credal belief of Hinduism in an *Upanishadic mantra*, and thereafter at every meeting gave lucid and simple commentaries on the numerous implications of that all-comprehensive *mantra*. The pure exposition without much of a commentary was given on the previous day at Quilon and is reproduced below:

> Let me for a few moments consider what Hinduism consists of, what it is that has fired so many saints about whom we have historical record. Why has it contributed so many philosophers to the world? What is it in Hinduism that has so enthused its devotees for centuries? Did they see untouchability in Hinduism and still enthuse over it? In the midst of my struggle against untouchability I have been asked by several workers as to the essence of Hinduism. We have no simple *Kalma*, they said, that we find in Islam, nor have we John 3.16 of the Bible. Have we or have we not something that will answer the demands of the most philosophic among

the Hindus or the most matter-of-fact among them? Some have said, and not without good reason, the *Gayatri* answers that purpose. I have perhaps recited the *Gayatri mantra* a thousand times, having understood the meaning of it. But still it seems to me that it did not answer the whole of my aspirations. Then as you are aware I have, for years past, been swearing by the *Bhagawadgita*, and have said that it answers all my difficulties and has been my *kamadhenu*, my guide, my 'open sesame', on hundreds of moments of doubts and difficulty. I cannot recall a single occasion when it has failed me. But it is not a book that I can place before the whole of this audience. It requires a prayerful study before the *kamadhenu* yeilds the rich milk she holds in her udders.

But I have fixed upon one *mantra* that I am going to recite to you, as containing the whole essence of Hinduism. Many of you, I think, know the *Ishopanishad*. I read it years ago with translation and commentary. I learnt it by heart in Yeravda Jail. But it did not then captivate me, as it has done during the past few months, and I have now come to the final conclusion that if all the *Upanishads* and all the other scriptures happened all of a sudden to be reduced to ashes, and if only the first verse in the *Ishopanishad* were left intact in the memory of Hindus, Hinduism would live for ever.

Now this *mantra* divides itself in four parts. The first part is ईशावास्यमिदं सर्वं यत्किंच जगत्यां जगत् । It means, as I would translate, all this that we see in this great Universe is pervaded by God. Then come the second and third parts which read together, as I read them: तेन त्यक्तेन भुंजीथाः । I divide these into two and translate them thus: Renounce it and enjoy it.

There is another rendering which means the same thing, though: Enjoy what He gives you. Even so you can divide it into two parts. Then follows the final and most important part, मा गृधः कस्यस्विद्धनम् । which means: Do not covet anybody's wealth or possession. All the other *mantras* of that ancient *Upanishad* are a commentary or an attempt to give us the full meaning of the first *mantra*. As I read the *mantra* in the light of the *Gita* or the *Gita* in the light of the *mantra* I find that the *Gita* is a commentary on this *mantra*. It seems to me to satisfy the cravings of the socialist and the communist, of the philosopher and the economist. I venture to suggest to all who do not belong to the Hindu faith that it satisfies their cravings also. And if it is true—and I hold it to be true—you need not take anything in Hinduism which is inconsistent with or contrary to the meaning of this *mantra*. What more can a man in the street want to learn than this, that the one God and Creator and Master of all that lives pervades the Universe? The three other parts of the *mantra* follow directly from the first. If you believe that God pervades everything that He has created, you must believe that you cannot enjoy anything that is not given by Him. And seeing that He is the Creator of His numberless children, it follows that you cannot covet anybody's possession. If you think that you are one of His numerous creatures, it behoves you to renounce everything and lay it at His feet. That means that the act of renunciation of everything is not a mere physical renunciation but represents a second or new birth. It is a deliberate act, not done in ignorance. It is therefore a regeneration. And then since he who holds the body must eat and drink and clothe himself, he must

naturally seek all that he needs from Him. And he gets it as a natural reward of that renunciation. As if this was not enough the *mantra* closes with this magnificent thought: Do not covet anybody's possession. The moment you carry out these precepts you become a wise citizen of the world living at peace with all that lives. it satisfies one's highest aspirations on this earth and hereafter.

It is this *mantra* that Gandhiji described at another meeting as the golden key for the solution of all the difficulties and doubts that may assail one's heart.

Remember that one verse of the *Ishopanishad* and forget all about the other scriptures. You can of course drown yourselves and be suffocated in the ocean of scriptures. They are good for the learned if they will be humble and wise, but for the ordinary man in the street nothing but this *mantra* is necessary to carry him across the ocean:

'God the Ruler pervades all there is in this Universe. Therefore renounce and dedicate all to Him, and then enjoy or use the portion that may fall to thy lot. Never covet anybody's possession.'

Harijan, 30 January 1937

17

The Haripad Speech*

At this meeting I would love to detain you for a few minutes on the message of Hinduism I gave to the meeting in Quilon last night. I ventured at that meeting to say that the whole of Hinduism could be summed up in the first verse of the *Ishopanishad*.

ईशावास्यमिदं सर्वं यत्किंच जगत्यां जगत्
तेन त्यक्तेन भुंजीथा मा गृधः कस्यस्विद्धनम्।

Those who know a little bit of Sanskrit will find that there is nothing abstruse there that you find in other *Vedic mantras*, and its meaning is simply this: All that there is in this Universe, great or small, including the tiniest atom, is pervaded by God, known as Creator or Lord. *Isha* means the Ruler, and He who is the Creator naturally by very right becomes the Ruler too. And here in this verse the seer has chosen no other epithet for the Deity but that of the Ruler, and he has excepted nothing from His jurisdiction. He says everything that we see is pervaded by the Deity, and from that naturally the other parts of the *mantra* follow. Thus he says, 'Renounce everything,' i.e. everything that is on this Universe, the whole of the Universe, and not only this tiny

*Full text of speech delivered by Gandhiji at Haripad in Travancore on 17 January 1937.

globe of ours, renounce it. He asks us to renounce it as we are such insignificant atoms that if we had any idea of possession it would seem ludicrous. And then, says the *rishi*, the reward of the renunciation is भुंजीथाः, i.e. enjoyment of all you need. But there is a meaning in the word translated 'enjoy', which may as well be translated as 'use', 'eat' etc. It signifies, therefore, that you may not take more than necessary for your growth. Hence this enjoyment or use is limited by two conditions. One is the act of renunciation or, as the author of the *Bhagawata* would say, enjoy in the spirit of कृष्णार्पणमस्तु सर्वम् (or offering all to God). And every day in the morning every one who believes in the *Bhagawata Dharma* has to dedicate his thoughts, words and deeds to Krishna, and not until he has performed that daily act of renunciation or dedication has he the right of touching anything or drinking even a cup of water. And when a man has performed that act of renunciation and dedication, he derives from that act the right of eating, drinking, clothing and housing himself to the extent necessary for his daily life. Therefore take it as you like, either in the sense that the enjoyment or use is the reward of renunciation, or that the renunciation is the condition of enjoyment, renunciation is essential for our very existence, for our soul. And as if that condition given in the *mantra* was incomplete, the *rishi* hastened to complete it by adding: 'Do not covet what belongs to another.' Now I suggest to you that the whole of the philosophy or religion found in any part of the world is contained in this *mantra*, and it excludes everything contrary to it. According to the canons of interpretation, anything that is inconsistent with *Shruti*—and *Ishopanishad* is a *Shruti*—is to be rejected altogether.

Temples Purified

Now I should like to apply this *mantra* to present-day

conditions. If all that there is in the Universe is pervaded by God, that is to say, if the *brahmana* and the *bhangi*, the learned man and the scavenger, the Ezhava and the pariah, no matter what caste they belong to—if all these are pervaded by Lord God, in the light of this *mantra*, there is none that is high and none that is low, all are absolutely equal, equal because all are the creatures of that Creator. And this is not a philosophical thing to be dished out to *brahmanas* or *kshatriyas*, but it enunciates an eternal truth which admits of no reduction, no palliation. Therefore the Maharajah himself and the Maharani are not one whit superior to the lowliest being in Travancore. We are all creatures and servants of one God. If the Maharajah is the first among equals, as he is, he is so not by right of overlordship, but by right of service. And therefore how nice, how noble it is that every Maharajah is called *Padmanabhadas*!* Therefore when I told you that the Maharajah or the Maharani were not one whit superior to any one of us, I told you what was the actual truth accepted by their Highnesses themselves. And if that is so, how can anyone here dare to arrogate superiority to himself or herself over any other human being? I tell you, therefore, that if this *mantra* holds good, if there is any man or woman here who believes that the temples are defiled by those called *avarnas*, that person I declare would be guilty of a grave sin. I tell you that the Proclamation† has purified our temples of the taint that had attached to them.

I would like the *mantra* I have recited to be enshrined in the hearts of all our men and women and children, and if this contains, as I hold, the essence of Hinduism, it should be inscribed on the portals of every temple. Don't you then think that we should be belying that *mantra* at every step if we excluded anyone from those temples? Therefore if you will prove yourself

deserving of the gracious Proclamation and if you will be loyal to yourself and to those who preside over your destinies, you will carry out the letter and spirit of this Proclamation. From the date of the Proclamation the Travancore temples, which as I once said were not abodes of God, have become abodes of God, since no one who used to be regarded as untouchable is any more to be excluded from them. I therefore hope and pray that throughout Travancore there may be no man or woman who will abstain from going to the temples for the reason that they have been opened to those who were regarded as *pariahs* of society.

Harijan, 30 January 1937

18

From the Kottayam Speech

The *mantra* describes God as the Creator, the Ruler, and the Lord. The seer to whom this *mantra* or verse was revealed was not satisfied with the magnificent statement that God was to be found everywhere. But he went further and said: 'Since God pervades everything nothing belongs to you, not even your own body. God is the undisputed, unchallengeable Master of everything you possess.' And so when a person who calls himself a Hindu goes through the process of regeneration or a second birth, as Christians would call it, he has to perform a dedication or renunciation of all that he has in ignorance called his own property. And then when he has performed this act of dedication or renunciation, he is told that he will win a reward in the shape of God taking good care of what he will require for food, clothing or housing. Therefore the condition of enjoyment or use of the necessaries of life is their dedication or renunciation. And that dedication or renunciation has got to be done from day to day, lest we may in this busy world forget the central fact of life. And to crown all, the seer says: 'Covet not anybody's riches.' I suggest

to you that the truth that is embedded in this very short *mantra* is calculated to satisfy the highest cravings of every human being—whether they have reference to this world or to the next. I have in my search of the scriptures of the world found nothing to add to this *mantra*. Looking back upon all the little I have read of the scriptures—it is precious little I confess—I feel that everything good in all the scriptures is derived from this *mantra*. If it is universal brotherhood—not only brotherhood of all human beings, but of all living beings—I find it in this *mantra*. If it is unshakable faith in the Lord and Master –and all the adjectives you can think of —I find it in this *mantra*. If it is the idea of complete surrender to God and of the faith that He will supply all that I need then again I say I find it in this *mantra*. Since He pervades every fibre of my being and of all of you, I derive from it the doctrine of equality of all creatures on earth and it should satisfy the cravings of all philosophical communists. This *mantra* tells me that I cannot hold as mine anything that belongs to God, and if my life and that of all who believe in this *mantra* has to be a life of perfect dedication, it follows that it will have to be a life of continual service of our fellow creatures.

This, I say, is my faith and should be the faith of all who call themselves Hindus. And I venture to suggest to my Christian and Mussulman friends that they will find nothing more in their scriptures if they will search them.

I do not wish to hide from you the fact that I am not unaware of many superstitions that go under the name of Hinduism. I am most painfully conscious of all the superstitions that are to be found masquerading as Hinduism, and I have no hesitation to call a spade a spade. I have not hesitated to describe untouchability as the greatest of these superstitions. But in spite of them

all, I remain a Hindu. For I do not believe that these superstitions form part of Hinduism. The very canons of interpretation laid down by Hinduism teach me that whatever is inconsistent with the truth I have expounded to you and which is hidden in the *mantra* I have named, must be summarily rejected as not belonging to Hinduism.

Harijan, 30 January 1937

19

Yajna or Sacrifice

Yajna means an act directed to the welfare of others, done without desiring any return for it, whether of a temporal or spiritual nature. 'Act' here must be taken in its widest sense, and includes thought and word, as well as deed. 'Others' embraces not only humanity, but all life. Therefore, and also from the standpoint of *ahimsa*, it is not a *yajna* to sacrifice lower animals even with a view to the service of humanity. It does not matter that animal sacrifice is alleged to find a place in the *Vedas*. It is enough for us that such sacrifice cannot stand the fundamental tests of Truth and Non-violence. I readily admit my incompetence in *Vedic* scholarship. But the incompetence, so far as this subject is concerned, does not worry me, because even if the practice of animal sacrifice be proved to have been a feature of *Vedic* society, it can form no precedent for a votary of *ahimsa*.

Again a primary sacrifice must be an act, which conduces the most to the welfare of the greatest number in the widest area, and which can be performed by the largest number of men and women with the least

trouble. It will not therefore, be a *yajna*, much less a *mahayajna*, to wish or to do ill to any one else, even in order to serve a so-called higher interest. And the *Gita* teaches, and experience testifies, that all action that cannot come under the category of *yajna* promotes bondage.

The world cannot subsist for a single moment without *yajna* in this sense, and therefore the *Gita*, after having dealt with true wisdom in the second chapter, takes up in the third the means of attaining it, and declares in so many words, that *yajna* came with the Creation itself. This body, therefore, has been given us, only in order that we may serve all creation with it. And, therefore, says the *Gita*, he who eats without offering *yajna* eats stolen food. Every single act of one who would lead a life of purity should be in the nature of *yajna*. *Yajna* having come to us with our birth, we are debtors all our lives, and thus for ever bound to serve the universe. And even as a bondslave receives food, clothing and so on from the master whom he serves, so should we gratefully accept such gifts as may be assigned to us by the Lord of the universe. What we receive must be called a gift; for as debtors we are entitled to no consideration for the discharge of our obligations. Therefore we may not blame the Master, if we fail to get it. Our body is His to be cherished or cast away according to His will. This is not a matter for complaint or even pity; on the contrary, it is natural and even a pleasant and desirable state, if only we realize our proper place in God's scheme. We do indeed need strong faith, if we would experience this supreme bliss. "Do not worry in the least about yourself, leave all worry to God." —this appears to be the commandment in all religions.

This need not frighten any one. He who devotes

himself to service with a clear conscience will day by day grasp the necessity for it in greater measure, and will continually grow richer in faith. The path of service can hardly be trodden by one, who is not prepared to renounce self-interest, and to recognize the conditions of his birth. Consciously or unconsciously every one of us does render some service or other. If we cultivate the habit of doing this service deliberately, our desire for service will steadily grow stronger, and will make not only for our own happiness, but that of the world at large.

* * *

Again, not only the good, but all of us are bound to place our resources at the disposal of humanity. And if such is the law, as evidently it is, indulgence ceases to hold a place in life and gives way to renunciation. The duty of renunciation differentiates mankind from the beast.

Some object, that life thus understood becomes dull and devoid of art, and leaves no room for the householder. But renunciation here does not mean abandoning the world and retiring into the forest. The spirit of renunciation should rule all the activities of life. A householder does not cease to be one if he regards life as a duty rather than as an indulgence. A merchant, who operates in the sacrificial spirit, will have crores passing through his hands, but he will, if he follows the law, use his abilities for service. He will therefore not cheat or speculate, will lead a simple life, will not injure a living soul and will lose millions rather than harm anybody. Let no one run away with the idea that this type of merchant exists only in my imagination. Fortunately for the world, it does exist in the West as well as in the East. It is true, such merchants may be counted on one's fingers' ends, but the type ceases to be imaginary, as

soon as even one living specimen can be found to answer to it. No doubt such sacrificers obtain their livelihood by their work. But livelihood is not their objective, but only a by-product of their vocation. A life of sacrifice is the pinnacle of art, and is full of true joy. *Yajna* is not *yajna* if one feels it to be burdensome or annoying. Self-indulgence leads to destruction, and renunciation to immortality. Joy has no independent existence. It depends upon our attitude to life. One man will enjoy theatrical scenery, another the ever new scenes which unfold themselves in the sky. Joy, therefore, is a matter of individual and national education. We shall relish things which we have been taught to relish as children. And illustrations can be easily cited of different national tastes.

Again, many sacrificers imagine that they are free to receive from the people everything they need, and many things they do not need, because they are rendering disinterested service. Directly this idea sways a man, he ceases to be a servant, and becomes a tyrant over the people.

One who would serve will not waste a thought upon his own comforts, which he leaves to be attended to or neglected by his Master on high. He will not therefore encumber himself with everything that comes his way; he will take only what he strictly needs and leave the rest. He will be calm, free from anger and unruffled in mind even if he finds himself inconvenienced. His service, like virtue, is its own reward, and he will rest content with it.

Again, one dare not be negligent in service, or be behindhand with it. He, who thinks that one must be diligent only in one's personal business, and unpaid public business may be done in any way and at any time one chooses, has still to learn the very rudiments of the

science of sacrifice. Voluntary service of others demands the best of which one is capable, and must take precedence over service of self. In fact, the pure devotee consecrates himself to the service of humanity without any reservation whatever.

From Yeravda Mandir, Chapter XIV-XV

20

Brahman Non-Brahman Question

What we see today is not pure Hinduism, but often a parody of it. Otherwise it would require no pleading from me in its behalf, but would speak for itself, even as if I was absolutely pure I would not need to speak to you. God does not speak with His tongue, and man in the measure that he comes near God becomes like God. Hinduism teaches me that my body is a limitation of the power of the soul within.

Just as in the West they have made wonderful discoveries in things material, similarly Hinduism has made still more marvellous discoveries in things of religion, of the spirit, of the soul. But we have no eye for these great and fine discoveries. We are dazzled by the material progress that Western science has made. I am not enamoured of that progress. In fact, it almost seems as though God in His wisdom had prevented India from progressing along those lines, so that it might fulfil its special mission of resisting the onrush of materialism. After all, there is something in Hinduism that has kept it alive up till now. It has witnessed the fall of Babylonian, Syrian, Persian and Egyptian civilizations.

Cast a look round you. Where is Rome and Greece? Can you find today anywhere the Italy of Gibbon, or rather the ancient Rome, for Rome was Italy? Go to Greece. Where is the world-famous Attic civilization? Then come to India, let one go through the most ancient records and then look round you and you would be constrained to say, 'Yes, I see here ancient India still living.' True, there are dungheaps, too, here and there, but there are rich treasures buried under them. And the reason why it has survived is that the end which Hinduism set before it was not development along material but spiritual lines.

Among its many contributions the idea of man's identity with the dumb creation is a unique one. To me cow-worship is a great idea which is capable of expansion. The freedom of Hinduism from the modern proselytization is also to me a precious thing. It needs no preaching. It says, 'Live the life.' It is my business, it is your business to live the life, and then we will leave its influence on ages. Then take its contribution in men: Ramanuja, Chaitanya, Ramakrishna, not to speak of the more modern names, have left their impress on Hinduism. Hinduism is by no means a spent force or a dead religion.

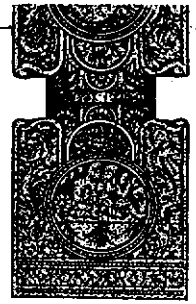
Then there is the contribution of the four *ashramas*, again a unique contribution. There is nothing like it in the whole world. The Catholics have the order of celibates corresponding to *brahmacharis*, but not as an institution, whereas in India every boy had to go through the first *ashrama*. What a grand conception it was! Today our eyes are dirty, thoughts dirtier and bodies dirtiest of all, because we are denying Hinduism.

There is yet another thing I have not mentioned. Max Muller said forty years ago that it was dawning on Europe that transmigration is not a theory, but a fact.

Well, it is entirely the contribution of Hinduism.

Today *varnashramadharma* and Hinduism are misrepresented and denied by its votaries. The remedy is not destruction, but correction. Let us reproduce in ourselves the true Hindu spirit, and then ask whether it satisfies the soul or not.

Young India, 24 November 1927



21

God and Congress

To me God is Truth and Love: God is ethics and morality; God is fearlessness. God is the source of Light and Life and yet He is above and beyond all these. God is conscience. He is even the atheism of the atheist. For in His boundless love God permits the atheist to live. He is the searcher of hearts: He transcends speech and reason. He knows us and our hearts better than we do ourselves. He does not take us at our word for He knows that we often do not mean it, some knowingly and others unknowingly. He is a personal God to those who need His personal presence. He is embodied to those who need His touch. He is the purest essence. He simply Is to those who have faith. He is all things to all men. He is in us and yet above and beyond us. One may banish the word 'God' from the Congress but one has no power to banish the Thing itself. What is a solemn affirmation, if it is not the same thing as in the name of God? And surely conscience is but a poor and laborious paraphrase of the simple combination of three letters called God. He cannot cease to be because hideous immoralities or inhuman brutalities are committed in

His name. He is long suffering. He is patient but He is also terrible. He is the most exacting personage in the world and the world to come. He metes out the same measure to us as we mete out to our neighbours—men and brutes. With Him ignorance is no excuse. And withal He is ever forgiving for He always gives us the chance to repent. He is the greatest democrat the world knows, for He leaves us 'unfettered' to make our own choice between evil and good. He is the greatest tyrant ever known, for He often dashes the cup from our lips and under cover of free will leaves us a margin so wholly inadequate as to provide only mirth for Himself at our expense. Therefore it is that Hinduism calls it all His sport—*Lila*, or calls it all an illusion—*Maya*. We are not, He alone Is. And if we will be, we must eternally sing His praise and do His will. Let us dance to the tune of His *bansi*—flute, and all would be well.

Young India, 5 March 1925

22

Advaitism and God

[In answer to a friend's question, Gandhiji wrote:]

I am an *advaitist* and yet I can support *dvaitism* (dualism). The world is changing every moment, and is therefore unreal, it has no permanent existence. But though it is constantly changing, it has a something about it which persists and it is therefore to that extent real. I have therefore no objection to calling it real and unreal, and thus being called an *anekantavadi* or a *syadvadi*. But my *syadvada* is not the *syadvada* of the learned, it is peculiarly my own. I cannot engage in a debate with them. It has been my experience that I am always true from my point of view, and am often wrong from the point of view of my honest critics. I know that we are both right from our respective points of view. And this knowledge saves me from attributing motives to my opponents or critics. The seven blind men who gave seven different descriptions of the elephant were all right from their respective points of view, and wrong from the point of view of one another, and right and wrong from the point of view of the man who knew the elephant. I very much like this doctrine of the manyness

of reality. It is this doctrine that has taught me to judge a Mussulman from his own standpoint and a Christian from his. Formerly I used to resent the ignorance of my opponents. Today I can love them because I am gifted with the eye to see myself as others see me and vice versa. I want to take the whole world in the embrace of my love. My *anekantavada* is the result of the twin doctrine of *satya* and *ahimsa*.

I talk of God exactly as I believe Him to be. I believe Him to be creative as well as non-creative. This too is the result of my acceptance of the doctrine of the manyness of reality. From the platform of the Jains I prove the non-creative aspect of God, and from that of Ramanuja the creative aspect. As a matter of fact we are all thinking of the Unthinkable, describing the Indescribable, seeking to know the Unknown, and that is why our speech falters, is inadequate and even often contradictory. That is why the *Vedas* describe *Brahman* as 'not this', 'not this'. But if He or It is not this, He or It is. If we exist, if our parents and their parents have existed, then it is proper to believe in the Parent of the whole creation. If He is not, we are nowhere. And that is why all of us with one voice call one God differently as *Paramatma*, *Ishwara*, Shiva, Vishnu, Rama, Allah, *Khuda*, Dada Hormuzda, Jehova, God, and an infinite variety of names. He is one and yet many; He is smaller than an atom, and bigger than the Himalayas. He is contained even in a drop of the ocean, and yet not even the seven seas can compass Him. Reason is powerless to know Him. He is beyond the reach or grasp of reason. But I need not labour the point. Faith is essential in this matter. My logic can make and unmake innumerable hypotheses. An atheist might floor me in a debate. But my faith runs so very much faster than my reason that I can challenge the whole world and say, 'God is, was and ever shall be.'

But those who want to deny His existence are at liberty to do so. He is merciful and compassionate. He is not an earthly king needing an army to make us accept His sway. He allows us freedom, and yet His compassion commands obedience to His will. But if any one of us disdain to bow to His will, He says: 'So be it. My sun will shine no less for thee, my clouds will rain no less for thee. I need not force thee to accept my sway.' Of such a God let the ignorant dispute the existence. I am one of the millions of wise men who believe in Him and am never tired of bowing to Him and singing His glory.

Young India, 21 January 1926

23

God Is

There is an indefinable mysterious Power that pervades everything. I feel it, though I do not see it. It is this unseen Power which makes itself felt and yet defies all proof, because it is so unlike all that I perceive through my senses. It transcends the senses.

But it is impossible to reason out the existence of God to a limited extent. Even in ordinary affairs we know that people do not know who rules or why, and how he rules. And yet they know that there is a power that certainly rules. In my tour last year in Mysore I met many poor villagers and I found upon inquiry that they did not know who ruled Mysore. They simply said some god ruled it. If the knowledge of these poor people was so limited about their ruler I who am infinitely lesser than God, than they than their ruler, need not be surprised if I do not realize the presence of God the King of kings. Nevertheless I do feel as the poor villagers felt about Mysore that there is orderliness in the Universe, there is an unalterable Law governing everything and every being that exists or lives. It is not a blind law; for no blind law can govern the conduct of living beings,

and thanks to the marvellous researches of Sir J. C. Bose, it can now be proved that even matter is life. That Law then which governs all life is God. Law and the Law-giver are one. I may not deny the Law or the Law-giver, because I know so little about It or Him. Even as my denial or ignorance of the existence of an earthly power will avail me nothing, so will not my denial of God and His Law liberate me from its operation; whereas humble and mute acceptance of divine authority makes life's journey easier even as the acceptance of earthly rule makes life under it easier.

I do dimly perceive that whilst everything around me is ever changing, ever dying, there is underlying all that change a living power that is changeless, that holds all together, that creates, dissolves and recreates. That informing power or spirit is God. And since nothing else I see merely through the senses can or will persist, He alone is.

And is this power benevolent or malevolent? I see it is purely benevolent. For I can see that in the midst of death life persists, in the midst of untruth truth persists, in the midst of darkness light persists. Hence I gather that God is Life, Truth, Light. He is Love. He is the Supreme Good.

But He is no God who merely satisfies the intellect, if He ever does. God to be God must rule the heart and transform it. He must express Himself in every smallest act of His votary. This can only be done through a definite realization more real than the five senses can ever produce. Sense perceptions can be, often are, false and deceptive, however real they may appear to us. Where there is realization outside the senses it is infallible. It is proved not by extraneous evidence but in the transformed conduct and character of those who have felt the real presence of God within.

Such testimony is to be found in the experiences of

an unbroken line of prophets and sages in all countries and climes. To reject this evidence is to deny myself.

This realization is preceded by an immovable faith. He who would in his own person test the fact of God's presence can do so by a living faith. And since faith itself cannot be proved by extraneous evidence, the safest course is to believe in the moral government of the world and therefore in the supremacy of the moral law, the law of truth and love. Exercise of faith will be the safest where there is a clear determination summarily to reject all that is contrary to Truth and Love.

I cannot account for the existence of evil by any rational method. To want to do so is to be coequal with God. I am therefore humble enough to recognize evil as such. And I call God long suffering and patient precisely because He permits evil in the world. I know that He has no evil. He is the author of it and yet untouched by it.

I know too that I shall never know God if I do not wrestle with and against evil even at the cost of life itself. I am fortified in the belief by my own humble and limited experience. The purer I try to become, the nearer I feel to be to God. How much more should I be, when my faith is not a mere apology as it is today but has become as immovable as the Himalayas and as white and bright as the snows on their peaks? Meanwhile I invite the correspondent to pray with Newman who sang from experience:

Lead, kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom,
Lead Thou me on:
The night is dark and I am far from home,
Lead Thou me on.
Keep Thou my feet, I do not ask to see
The distant scene; one step enough for me.

Young India, 11 October 1928

24

Letter from Europe

[Replying to a question asked of him at a meeting in Switzerland on his way back from the Round Table Conference in London, Gandhiji said:]

You have asked me why I consider that God is Truth. In my early youth I was taught to repeat what in Hindu scriptures are known as one thousand names of God. But these one thousand names of God were by no means exhaustive. We believe—and I think it is the truth—that God has as many names as there are creatures and, therefore, we also say that God is nameless and since God has many forms we also consider Him formless, and since He speaks to us through many tongues we consider Him to be speechless and so on. And so when I came to study Islam I found that Islam too had many names for God. I would say with those who say God is Love, God is Love. But deep down in me I used to say that though God may be love, God is Truth, above all. If it is possible for the human tongue to give the fullest description of God, I have come to the conclusion that for myself, God is Truth. But two years ago I went a step further and said that Truth is God. You

will see the fine distinction between the two statements, viz. that God is Truth and Truth is God. And I came to that conclusion after a continuous and relentless search after Truth which began nearly fifty years ago. I then found that the nearest approach to Truth was through love. But I also found that love has many meanings in the English language at least and that human love in the sense of passion could become a degrading thing also. I found too that love in the sense of *ahimsa* had only a limited number of votaries in the world. But I never found a double meaning in connection with truth and even atheists had not demurred to the necessity or power of truth. But in their passion for discovering truth the atheists have not hesitated to deny the very existence of God—from their own point of view rightly. And it was because of this reasoning that I saw that rather than say that God is Truth I should say that Truth is God. I recall the name of Charles Bradlaugh who delighted to call himself an atheist, but knowing as I do something of him, I would never regard him as an atheist. I would call him a God-fearing man, though I know that he would reject the claim. His face would redden if I would say "Mr. Bradlaugh, you are a truth-fearing man, and so a God-fearing man." I would automatically disarm his criticism by saying that Truth is God, as I have disarmed criticisms of many a young man. Add to this the great difficulty that millions have taken the name of God and in His name committed nameless atrocities. Not that scientists very often do not commit cruelties in the name of truth. I know how in the name of truth and science inhuman cruelties are perpetrated on animals when men perform vivisection. There are thus a number of difficulties in the way, no matter how you describe God. But the human mind is a limited thing, and you have to labour under limitations when

you think of a being or entity who is beyond the power of man to grasp.

And then we have another thing in Hindu philosophy, viz. God alone is and nothing else exists, and the same truth you find emphasized and exemplified in the *Kalma* of Islam. There you find it clearly stated—that God alone is and nothing else exists. In fact the Sanskrit word for Truth is a word which literally means that which exists—*Sat*. For these and several other reasons that I can give you I have come to the conclusion that the definition, 'Truth is God', gives me the greatest satisfaction. And when you want to find Truth as God the only inevitable means is Love, i.e. non-violence, and since I believe that ultimately the means and the end are convertible terms, I sould not hestitate to say that God is Love.

'What then is Truth?'

A difficult question, (said Gandhiji), but I have solved it for myself by saying that it is what the voice within tells you. How, then, you ask, different people think of different and contrary truths? Well, seeing that the human mind works through innumerable media and that the evolution of the human mind is not the same for all, it follows that what may be truth for one may be untruth for another, and hence those who have made these experiments have come to the conclusion that there are certain conditions to be observed in making those experiments. Just as for conducting scientific experiments there is an indispensable scientific course of instruction, in the same way strict preliminary discipline is necessary to qualify a person to make experiments in the spiritual realm. Every one should, therefore, realize his limitations before he speaks of his inner voice. Therefore we have the belief based upon experience, that those who would make individual

search after truth as God, must go through several vows, as for instance, the vow of truth, the vow of *brah macharya* (purity)–for you cannot possibly divide your love for Truth and God with anything else-- the vow of non-violence, of poverty and non-possession. Unless you impose on yourselves the five vows you may not embark on the experiment at all. There are several other conditions prescribed, but I must not take you through all of them. Suffice it to say that those who have made these experiments know that it is not proper for every one to claim to hear the voice of conscience, and it is because we have at the present moment everybody claiming the right of conscience without going through any discipline whatsoever and there is so much untruth being delivered to a bewildered world, all that I can, in true humility, present to you is that truth is not to be found by anybody who has not got an abundant sense of humility. If you would swim on the bosom of the ocean of Truth you must reduce yourself to a zero. Further than this I cannot go along this fascinating path.

Young India, 31 December 1931

25

Approach Temples in Faith

[During the course of his speech delivered at Trivandrum in connection with Travancore Temple Entry Proclamation Celebrations, Gandhiji said:]

In the days of my youth I went to many temples with the faith and devotion with which my parents had fired me. But of late years I have not been visiting temples, and ever since I have been engaged in anti-untouchability work, I have refrained from going to temples unless they were open to every one called untouchable. So what I saw this morning at the temple dawned upon me with the same newness with which it must have dawned upon so many *avarna* Hindus who must have gone to the temple after the Proclamation. In imagination my mind travelled back to the pre-historic centuries when temples began to convey the message of God in stone and metal. I saw quite clearly that the priest who was interpreting each figure in his own choice Hindi did not want to tell me that each of those figures was God. But without giving me that particular interpretation he made me realize that these temples were so many bridges between the Unseen, Invisible

and Indefinable God and ourselves who are infinitesimal drops in the Infinite Ocean. We the human family are not all philosophers. We are of the earth very earthy, and we are not satisfied with contemplating the Invisible God. Somehow or other we want something which we can touch, something which we can see, something before which we can kneel down. It does not matter whether it is a book, or an empty stone building, or a stone building inhabited by numerous figures. A book will satisfy some, an empty building will satisfy some others, and many others will not be satisfied unless they see something inhabiting these empty buildings. Then I ask you to approach these temples not as if they represented a body of superstitions. If you will approach these temples with faith in them, you will know that each time you visit them you will come away from them purified, and with your faith more and more in the living God.

Harijan, 23 January 1937

26

The Meaning of the Gita

A friend puts forward the following poser:

> The controversy about the teaching of the Gita—whether it is *himsa* (violence) or *ahimsa* (non-violence)—will, it seems, go on for a long time. It is one thing what meaning we read in the *Gita*, or rather we want to read in the *Gita*; it is another what meaning is furnished by an unbiased reading of it. The question, therefore, does not present much difficulty to one who implicitly accepts *ahimsa* as the eternal principle of life. He will say that the *Gita* is acceptable to him only if it teaches *ahimsa*. A grand book like the *Gita* could, for him, inculcate nothing grander than the eternal religious principle of *ahimsa*. If it did not it would cease to be his unerring guide. It would still be worthy of his high regard, but not an infallible authority.
>
> In the first chapter we find Arjuna laying down his weapons, under the influence of *ahimsa*, and ready to die at the hands of the Kauravas. He conjures up a vision of the disaster and the sin involved in *himsa*. He is overcome with ennui and in fear and trembling exclaims: 'Oh what a mighty sin we are up to!'
>
> Shri Krishna catches him in that mood and tells him: 'Enough of this high philosophy; No one kills or is killed. The soul is immortal and the body must perish. Fight then the fight that has come to thee as a matter of duty. Victory or defeat is no concern of thine. Acquit thyself of thy task.'
>
> In the eleventh chapter the Lord presents a panoramic vision of the Universe and says: 'I am *Kala*, the Destroyer of the worlds, the Ancient of Days; I am here engaged in My task of destruction of the worlds. Kill thou those already killed by Me. Give not thyself up to grief.'
>
> *Himsa* and *ahimsa* are equal before God. But for man what is God's message? Is it this: 'Fight; for thou art sure to foil thy enemies in the field'? If the *Gita* teaches *ahimsa* the first and the eleventh chapters are not consistent with the rest, at any rate do not support the *ahimsa* theory. I wish you could find time to resolve my doubt.

The question put is eternal and every one who has studied the *Gita* must needs find out his own solution. And although I am going to offer mine, I know that ultimately one is guided not by the intellect but by the heart. The heart accepts a conclusion for which the intellect subsequently finds the reasoning. Argument follows conviction. Man often finds reasons in support of whatever he does or wants to do.

I shall therefore appreciate the position of those who are unable to accept my interpretation of the *Gita*. All I need do is to indicate how I reached my meaning, and what canons of interpretation I have followed in arriving at it. Mine is but to fight for my meaning, no matter whether I win or lose.

My first acquaintance with the *Gita* was in 1889, when I was almost twenty. I had not then much of an inkling of the principle of *ahimsa*. One of the lines of the Gujarati poet, Shamalbhatta, had taught me the principle of winning even the enemy with love, and that teaching had gone deep into me. But I had not deduced the eternal principle of non-violence from it. It did not, for instance, cover all animal life. I had, before this, tasted meat whilst in India. I thought it a duty to kill venomous reptiles like the snake. It is my conviction today that even venomous creatures may not be killed by a believer in *ahimsa*. I believed in those days in preparing ourselves for a fight with the English. I often repeated a Gujarati poet's famous doggerel: 'What wonder if Britain rules!' etc. My meat-eating was as a first step to qualify myself for the fight with the English. Such was my position before I proceeded to England, and there I escaped meat-eating etc. because of my determination to follow unto death the promises I had given to my mother. My love for truth has saved me from many a pitfall.

Now whilst in England my contact with two English friends made me read the *Gita*. I say 'made me read', because it was not of my own desire that I read it. But when these two friends asked me to read the *Gita* with them, I was ashamed of my ignorance. The knowledge of my total ignorance of my scriptures pained me. Pride, I think, was at the bottom of this feeling. My knowledge of Sanskrit was not enough to enable me to understand all the verses of the *Gita* unaided. The friends, of course, were quite innocent of Sanskrit. They placed before me Sir Edwin Arnold's magnificent rendering of the *Gita*. I devoured the contents from cover to cover and was entranced by it. The last nineteen verses of the second chapter have since been inscribed on the tablet of my

heart. They contain for me all knowledge. The truths they teach are the 'eternal verities'. There is reasoning in them but they represent realized knowledge.

I have since read many translations and many commentaries, have argued and reasoned to my heart's content but the impression that the first reading gave me has never been effaced. Those verses are the key to the interpretation of the *Gita*. I would even advise rejection of the verses that may seem to be in conflict with them. But a humble student need reject nothing. He will simply say: 'It is the limitation of my own intellect that I cannot resolve this inconsistency. I might be able to do so in the time to come.' That is how he will plead with himself and with others.

A prayerful study and experience are essential for a correct interpretation of the scriptures. The injunction that a *shudra* may not study the scriptures is not entirely without meaning. A *shudra* means a spiritually uncultured, ignorant man. He is more likely than not to misinterpret the *Vedas* and other scriptures. Every one cannot solve an algebraical equation. Some preliminary study is a *sine qua non*. How ill would the grand truth 'I am *Brahman*' lie in the mouth of a man steeped in sin! To what ignoble purposes would he turn it! What a distortion it would suffer at his hands!

A man therefore who would interpret the scriptures must have the spiritual discipline. He must practise the *yamas* and *niyamas*—the eternal guides of conduct. A superficial practice thereof is useless. The *shastras* have enjoined the necessity of a *guru*. But a *guru* being rare in these days, a study of modern books inculcating *bhakti* has been suggested by the sages. Those who are lacking in *bhakti*, lacking in faith, are ill-qualified to interpret the scriptures. The learned may draw an elaborately learned interpretation out of them, but that

will not be the true interpretation. Only the experienced will arrive at the true interpretation of the scriptures.

But even for the inexperienced there are certain canons. That interpretation is not true which conflicts with Truth. To one who doubts even Truth, the scriptures have no meaning. No one can contend with him. There is danger for the man who has failed to find *ahimsa* in the scriptures, but he is not doomed. Truth—*Sat*— is positive; non-violence is negative. Truth stands for the fact, non-violence negatives the fact. And yet non-violence is the highest religion. Truth is self-evident; non-violence is its maturest fruit. It is contained in Truth, but as it is not self-evident a man may seek to interpret the *shastras*, without accepting it. But his acceptance of Truth is sure to lead him to the acceptance of non-violence.

Renunciation of the flesh is essential for realizing Truth. The sage who realized Truth found non-violence out of the violence raging all about him and said: Violence is unreal, non-violence is real. Realization of Truth is impossible without non-violence. *Brahmacharya* (celibacy), *asteya* (non-stealing), *aparigraha* (non-possession) are means to achieve *ahimsa*. *Ahimsa* is the soul of Truth. Man is mere animal without it. A seeker after Truth will realize all this in his search for Truth and he will then have no difficulty in the interpretation of the *shastras*.

Another canon of interpretation is to scan not the letter but to examine the spirit. Tulsidas's *Ramayana* is a notable book because it is informed with the spirit of purity, pity and piety. There is a verse in it which brackets drums, *shudras*, fools and women together as fit to be beaten. A man who cites that verse to beat his wife is doomed to perdition. Rama did not only not beat his wife, but never even sought to displease her. Tulsidas

simply inserted in his poem a proverb current in his days, little dreaming that there would be brutes justifying beating of their wives on the authority of the verse. But assuming that Tulsidas himself followed a custom which was prevalent in his days and beat his wife, what then? The beating was still wrong. But the *Ramayana* was not written to justify beating of wives by their husbands. It was written to depict Rama, the perfect man, and Sita the ideal wife, and Bharata the ideal of a devoted brother. Any justification incidentally met with therein of vicious customs should therefore be rejected. Tulsidas did not write his priceless epic to teach geography, and any wrong geography that we happen to come across in *Ramayana* should be summarily rejected.

Let us examine the *Gita* in the light of these observations. Self-realization and its means is the theme of the *Gita*, the fight between two armies being but the occasion to expound the theme. You might, if you like, say that the Poet himself was not against war or violence and hence he did not hesitate to press the occasion of a war into service. But a reading of the *Mahabharata* has given me an altogether different impression. The poet Vyasa has demonstrated the futility of war by means of that epic of wonderful beauty. What, he asks, if the Kauravas were vanquished? And what if the Pandavas won? How many were left of the victors and what was their lot? What an end Mother Kunti came to? And where are the Yadawas today?

Where the description of the fight and justification of violence are not the subject-matter of the epic, it is quite wrong to emphasize those aspects. And if it is difficult to reconcile certain verses with the teaching of non-violence, it is far more difficult to set the whole of the *Gita* in the framework of violence.

The poet when he writes is not conscious of all the

interpretations his composition is capable of. The beauty of poetry is that the creation transcends the poet. The Truth that he reaches in the highest flights of his fancy is often not to be met with in his life. The life story of many a poet thus belies his poetry. That the central teaching of the *Gita* is not *himsa* but *ahimsa* is amply demonstrated by the subject begun in the second chapter and summarized in the concluding 18th chapter. The treatment in the other chapters also supports the position. *Himsa* is impossible without anger, without attachment, without hatred, and the *Gita* strives to carry us to the state beyond *sattwa, rajas* and *tamas*, a state that excludes anger, hatred etc. But I can even now picture to my mind Arjuna's eyes red with anger everytime he drew the bow to the end of his ear.

It was not in a spirit of *ahimsa* that Arjuna refused to go to battle. He had fought many a battle before. Only this time he was overcome with false pity. He fought shy of killing his own kith and kin. Arjuna never discussed the problem of killing his kith and kin. Arjuna never discussed the problem of killing as such. He did not say he would kill no one, even if he regarded him as wicked. Shri Krishna knows every one's innermost thoughts and he saw through the temporary infatuation of Arjuna. He therefore told him: 'Thou hast already done the killing. Thou canst not all at once argue thyself into non-violence. Finish what thou hast already begun.' If a passenger going in a Scotch Express gets suddenly sick of travelling and jumps out of it, he is guilty of suicide. He has not learnt the futility of travelling or travelling by a railway train. Similar was the case with Arjuna. Non-violent Krishna could give Arjuna no other advice. But to say that the *Gita* teaches violence or justifies war, because advice to kill was given a particular occasion, is as wrong as to say that *himsa* is the law

of life, because a certain amount of it is inevitable in daily life. To one who reads the spirit of the *Gita*, it teaches the secret of non-violence, the secret of realizing the self through the physical body.

And who are Dhritarashtra and Yudhishthira and Arjuna? Who is Krishna? Were they all historical characters? And does the *Gita* describe them as such? Is it true that Arjuna suddenly stops in the midst of the fight and puts the question to Krishna, and Krishna repeats the whole of the *Gita* before him? And which is that *Gita*--the *Gita* that Arjuna forgot after having exclaimed that his infatuation was gone and which he requested Krishna to sing again, but which he could not, and which therefore he gave in the form of *Anugita*?

I regard Duryodhana and his party as the baser impulses in man, and Arjuna and his party as the higher impulses. The field of battle is our own body. An eternal battle is going on between the two camps and the Poet Seer has vividly described it. Krishna is the Dweller within, ever whispering in a pure heart. Like the watch the heart needs the winding of purity, or the Dweller ceases to speak.

Not that actual physical battle is out of the question. To those who are innocent of non-violence, the *Gita* does not teach a lesson of despair. He who fears, who saves his skin, who yields to his passions, must fight the physical battle whether he will or no; but that is not his *dharma*. *Dharma* is one and one only. *Ahimsa* means *moksha*, and *moksha* is the realization of Truth. There is no room here for cowardice. *Himsa* will go on eternally in this strange world. The *Gita* shows the way out of it. But it also shows that escape out of cowardice and despair is not the way. Better far than cowardice is killing and being killed in battle.

If the meaning of the verses quoted by the corres-

pondent is not still clear, I must confess my inability to make it so. Is it agreed that that the Almighty God is the Creator, Protector and Destroyer and ought to be such? And if He creates, He has undoubtedly the right to destroy. And yet He does not destroy because He does not create. His law is that whatever is born must die, and in that lies His mercy. His laws are immutable. Where should we all be if He changed them capriciously?

Young India, 12 November 1925

27

Krishna Janmashtami

[The following is a summary of a speech delivered by Gandhiji at Arsikere in Mysore State:]

We do not know what Shri Krishna's life means for us, we do not read the *Gita*, we make no attempt to teach it to our children. The *Gita* is such a transcendental book that men of every creed, age and clime may read it with respect, and find in it the principles of their respective religions. If we thought of Krishna on every *Janmashtami* day and read the *Gita* and resolved to follow its teachings, we should not be in our present sorry plight. Shri Krishna served the people all his life, he was a real servant of the people. He could have led the hosts at Kurukshetra, but he preferred to be Arjuna's charioteer. His whole life was one unbroken *Gita* of *karma*. He refused proud Duryodhana's sweets and preferred humble Vidura's spinach. As a child he was a cowherd and we still know him by the name of Gopala. But we, his worshippers, have neglected the cow today, the Adi-Karnatakas slaughter cows and eat beef, and our infants and invalids have to go without cow's milk. Krishna knew no sleep or idleness. He kept sleepless

vigil of the world, we his posterity have become indolent and forgotten the use of our hands. In the *Bhagawadgita* Lord Krishna has shown the path of *bhakti*—which means the path of *karma*. Lokamanya Tilak has shown that whether we desire to be *bhaktas* or *jnanis*, *karma* is the only way; but the *karma* should not be for self but for others. Action for one's own self binds, action for the sake of others delivers from bondage. What can be the altruistic action which can be universally done, by Hindus, Mussulmans, Christians, by men, women and children? I have tried to demonstrate that spinning alone is that sacrificial act, for that alone can make us do something in God's name, something for the poorest, something that can infuse activity in their idle limbs. Lord Krishna has also taught that to be a true *bhakta* we should make no difference between a *brahmana* and a scavenger. If that is true there can be no place for untouchability in Hinduism. If you are still hugging that superstition you can cleanse yourself by getting rid of it on this the sacred day of Krishna's birth. He who swears by the *Gita* may know no distinction between Hindu and Mussulman, for Lord Krishna has declared that he who adores God in a true spirit by whatsoever name adores Him. The path of *bhakti, karma*, love as expounded in the *Gita*, leaves no room for the despising of man by man.

Young India, 1 September 1927

28

The Message of the Gita

1. Even in 1888-89, when I first became acquainted with the *Gita*, I felt that it was not a historical work, but that under the guise of physical warfare, it described the duel that perpetually went on in the hearts of mankind, and that physical warfare was brought in merely to make the description of the internal duel more alluring. This preliminary intuition became more confirmed on a closer study of religion and the *Gita*. A study of the *Mahabharata* gave it added confirmation. I do not regard the *Mahabharata* as a historical work in the accepted sense. The *Adiparva* contains powerful evidence in support of my opinion. By ascribing to the chief actors superhuman or subhuman origins, the great Vyasa made short work of the history of kings and their peoples. The persons therein described may be historical, but the author of the *Mahabharata* has used them merely to drive home his religious theme.
2. The author of the *Mahabharata* has not established the necessityof physical warfare; on the contrary

he has proved its futility. He has made the victors shed tears of sorrow and repentance, and has left them nothing but a legacy of miseries.

3. In this great work the *Gita* is the crown. Its second chapter, instead of teaching the rules of physical warfare, tells us how a perfected man is to be known. In the characteristics of the perfected man of the *Gita*, I do not see any to correspond to physical warfare. Its whole design is inconsistent with the rules of conduct governing the relations between warring parties.
4. Krishna of the *Gita* is perfection and right knowledge personified; but the picture is imaginary. That does not mean that Krishna, the adored of his people, never lived. But perfection is imagined. The idea of a perfect incarnation is an aftergrowth.
5. In Hinduism, incarnation is ascribed to one who has performed some extraordinary service of mankind. All embodied life is in reality an incarnation of God, but it is not usual to consider every living being an incarnation. Future generations pay this homage to one who, in his own generation, has been extraordinarily religious in his conduct. I can see nothing wrong in this procedure; it takes nothing from God's greatness, and there is no violence done to Truth. There is an Urdu saying which means, "Adam is not God but he is a spark of the Divine." And therefore he who is the most religiously behaved has most of the divine spark in him. It is in accordance with this train of thought that Krishna enjoys, in Hinduism, the status of the most perfect incarnation.
6. This belief in incarnation is a testimony of man's lofty spiritual ambition. Man is not at peace with himself till he has become like unto God. The endeavour to reach this state is the supreme, the

only ambition worth having. And this is self-realization. This self-realization is the subject of the *Gita*, as it is of all scriptures. But its author surely did not write it to establish that doctrine. The object of the *Gita* appears to me to be that of showing the most excellent way to attain self-realization. That which is to be found, more or less clearly, spread out here and there in Hindu religious books, has been brought out in the clearest possible language in the *Gita* even at the risk of repetition.

7. That matchless remedy is renunciation of the fruits of action.
8. This is the centre round which the *Gita* is woven. This renunciation is the central sun, round which devotion, knowledge and the rest revolve like planets. The body has been likened to a prison. There must be action where there is body. Not one embodied being is exempted from labour. And yet all religions proclaim that it is possible for man, by treating the body as the temple of God, to attain freedom. Every action is tainted, be it ever so trivial. How can the body be made the temple of God? In other words how can one be free from action, i.e. from the taint of sin? "By desireless action; by renouncing the fruits of action; by dedicating all activities to God, i.e. by surrendering oneself to Him body and soul."
9. But desirelessness or renunciation does not come for the mere talking about it. It is not attained by an intellectual feat. It is attainable only by a constant heart-churn. Right knowledge is necessary for attaining renunciation. Learned men possess a knowledge of a kind. They may recite the *Vedas* from memory, yet they may be steeped in self-indulgence. In order that knowledge may not run riot, the author of the *Gita* has insisted on devotion

accompanying it and has given it the first place. Knowledge without devotion will be like a misfire. Therefore, says the *Gita*, "Have devotion, and knowledge will follow." This devotion is not mere lip-worship, it is a wrestling with death. Hence the *Gita*'s assessment of the devotee's qualities is similar to that of the sage's.

10. Thus the devotion required by the *Gita* is no soft-hearted effusiveness. It certainly is not blind faith. The devotion of the *Gita* has the least to do with externals. A devotee may use, if he likes, rosaries, forehead marks, make offerings, but these things are no test of his devotion. He is the devotee who is jealous of none, who is a fount of mercy, who is without egotism, who is selfless, who treats alike cold and heat, happiness and misery, who is ever forgiving, who is always contented, whose resolutions are firm, who has dedicated mind and soul to God, who causes no dread, who is not afraid of others, who is free from exultation, sorrow and fear, who is pure, who is versed in action and yet remains unaffected by it, who renounces all fruit, good or bad, who treats friend and foe alike, who is untouched by respect or disrespect, who is not puffed up by praise, who does not go under when people speak ill of him, who loves silence and solitude, who has a disciplined reason. Such devotion is inconsistent with the existence at the same time of strong attachments.

11. We thus see, that to be a real devotee is to realize oneself. Self-realization is not something apart. One rupee can purchase for us poison or nectar, but knowledge or devotion cannot buy us either salvation or bondage. These are not media of exchange. They are themselves the thing we want. In other words if the means and the end are not

identical, they are almost so. The extreme of means is salvation. Salvation of the *Gita* is perfect peace.

12. But such knowledge and devotion, to be true, have to stand the test of renunciation of fruits of action. Mere knowledge of right and wrong will not make one fit for salvation. According to common notions, a mere learned man will pass as a *pandit*. He need not perform any service. He will regard it as bondage even to lift a little *lota*. Where one test of knowledge is non-liability for service, there is no room for such mundane work as the lifting of a *lota*.

13. Or take *bhakti*. The popular notion of *bhakti* is soft-heartedness, telling beads and the like and disdaining to do even a loving service, lest the telling of beads etc. might be interrupted. This *bhakta* therefore leaves the rosary only for eating, drinking and the like, never for grinding corn or nursing patients.

14. But the *Gita* says: "No one has attained his goal without action. Even men like Janaka attained salvation through action. If even I were lazily to cease working, the world would perish. How much more necessary then for the people at large to engage in action?"

15. While on the one hand it is beyond dispute that all action binds, on the other hand it is equally true that all living beings have to do some work whether they will or no. Here all activity, whether mental or physical, is to be included in the term action. Then how is one to be free from the bondage of action, even though he may be acting? The manner in which the *Gita* has solved the problem is, to my knowledge, unique. The *Gita* says: "Do your allotted work but renounce its fruit—be detached and work—have no desire for reward and work."
This is the unmistakable teaching of the *Gita*. He

who gives up action falls. He who gives up only the reward rises. But renunciation of fruit in no way means indifference to the result. In regard to every action one must know the result that is expected to follow, the means thereto, and the capacity for it. He, who, being thus equipped, is without desire for the result, and is yet wholly engrossed in the due fulfilment of the task before him, is said to have renounced the fruits of his action.

16. Again, let no one consider renunciation to mean want of fruit for the renouncer. The *Gita* reading does not warrant such a meaning. Renunciation means absence of hankering after fruit. As a matter of fact, he who renounces reaps a thousandfold. The renunciation of the *Gita* is the acid test of faith. He who is ever brooding over result often loses nerve in the performance of his duty. He becomes impatient and then gives vent to anger and begins to do unworthy things; he jumps from action to action, never remaining faithful to any. He who broods over results is like a man given to objects of senses; he is ever distracted, he says goodbye to all scruples, everything is right in his estimation and he therefore resorts to means fair and foul to attain his end.

17. From the bitter experiences of desire for fruit the author of the *Gita* discovered the path of renunciation of fruit, and put it before the world in most convincing manner. The common belief is that religion is always opposed to material good. "One cannot act religiously in mercantile and such other matters. There is no place for religion in such pursuits; religion is only for attainment of salvation," we hear many wordly-wise people say. In my opinion the author of the *Gita* has dispelled this delusion. He has drawn no line of demarcation

between salvation and wordly pursuits. On the contrary, he has shown that religion must rule even our worldly pursuits. I have felt that the *Gita* teaches us that what cannot be followed out in day-to-day practice cannot be called religion. Thus, according to the *Gita*, all acts that are incapable of being performed without attachment are taboo. This golden rule saves mankind from many a pitfall. According to this interpretation murder, lying, dissoluteness and the like must be regarded as sinful and therefore taboo. Man's life then becomes simple, and from that simpleness springs peace.

18. Thinking along these lines, I have felt that in trying to enforce in one's life the central teaching of the *Gita*, one is bound to follow truth and *ahimsa*. When there is no desire for fruit, there is no temptation for untruth or *himsa*. Take any instance of untruth or violence, and it will be found that at its back was the desire to attain the cherished end. But it may be freely admitted that the *Gita* was not written to establish *ahimsa*. It was an accepted and primary duty even before the *Gita* age. The *Gita* had to deliver the message of renunciation of fruit. This is clearly brought out as early as the second chapter.

19. But if the *Gita* believed in *ahimsa* or it was included in desirelessness, why did the author take a war-like illustration? When the *Gita* was written, although people believed in *ahimsa*, wars were not only not taboo, but nobody observed the contradiction between them and *ahimsa*.

20. In assessing the implications of renunciation of fruit, we are not required to probe the mind of the author of the *Gita* as to his limitations of *ahimsa* and the like. Because a poet puts a particular truth